



LATIN AMERICA UNDER CORONASHOCK



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COVER PHOTO

Herb and spice vendor working (despite the pandemic). Santa Cruz Street, La Paz, Bolivia, 2020.

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Social Crisis, Neoliberal Failure,
and the People's Alternatives



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The first cases of COVID-19 were detected in December 2019 in Wuhan (China). In early March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the rapidly expanding illness a pandemic. With more than ten million people infected across the world as of late June, the effects of the pandemic on the world system reach far beyond the realm of public health; indeed, a reconfiguration of social life is underway. The crisis spread by neoliberal capitalism is intensifying, as is the increasing necessity for an urgent transformation of the system along an alternative path (for more on this, read our dossier no. 28, *CoronaShock: A Virus and the World*, and our *CoronaShock studies*). In Latin America, the first cases of the disease were detected at the end of February. Four months later, at the end of June, the number of people infected in Latin America has reached for more than twenty-three per cent of the global total and twenty-two of daily deaths as the rapid spread of the virus has turned the region (particularly South America) into the new global epicentre of the pandemic.

The pandemic has furthered – sometimes dramatically – a series of economic and social processes that were already underway before the virus emerged. Capitalism’s crisis of legitimacy and increasingly authoritarian neoliberal reforms have put these policies and the US-led imperialist offensive into question (for more on this, read our report no. 6, *From 8M to the Coronavirus Crisis*). The expansion of the virus has also shined a light on the dismantling and privatisation of public healthcare – the result of decades of neoliberalism – as well as on the increasing precariousness of labour and the living conditions and quality of life of the people. The pandemic has put on display the resounding failure of neoliberal policies to effectively

combat the health and social crises. Finally, the current situation puts into question the effects, actions, and challenges that these processes pose for people's movements and the alternatives that they are creating.





Protest in Caracas, Venezuela after US President Donald Trump called for the imprisonment of President Nicolás Maduro, 28 March 2020.

United Socialist Party of Venezuela / Fotos Públicas

This Crisis is Not Natural

Numbers of those infected and killed by the virus began to sharply increase in May 2020. These numbers, threatening to serve as the straw that causes the collapse of health systems throughout the region, clearly show the disproportionately impact of the crisis on the poor and the working class. This is especially true in Brazil, Chile, Peru, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Bolivia, where the number of those infected has (drastically, in some cases) surpassed 2,000 cases per million residents. At the end of May, Brazil tragically became one of the first places in the world to reach such a high level of infections; by the end of June, it became the country with the second-highest number of deaths and infections, after the United States. Meanwhile, migration from the Dominican Republic to Haiti has accelerated the rapid spread of infections and is edging towards a humanitarian tragedy.

This is not about a natural curse; the pandemic was not biologically predetermined. Its emergence – as is the case with all of the pandemics that we have experienced throughout the twenty-first century – is linked to the processes of the industrial production of food and the destruction of native forests and jungles, which is characteristic of neoliberal capitalism. In addition, the transformation of the pandemic into a health and humanitarian crisis is linked to public policies and the approach of governments as well as other social, institutional, and historic resources that the people count on.

In the case of Latin America, COVID-19 emerged at a time when people were already questioning the wave of neoliberal policies that has been developing in the region since 2015, from structural adjustment to privatisation and other regressive reforms. Following the defeat of a wave of progressive governments in much of the region throughout the 2000s, in the last few years public health budgets were cut across most of these countries. These policies have resulted in the growth of poverty, precarisation, and inequality, as well as the dismantling of public health systems. In Argentina, for example, the Ministry of Health was combined with the Ministry of Social Health and downgraded to a secretariat in 2018. This shift was part of the process of structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund through its agreement with former president Mauricio Macri. Such waves of neoliberal policies have confronted Latin America since the 1970s, never failing to trigger deleterious social consequences.

The current crisis, therefore, is not an isolated or anomalous event. Rather, it rests on top of decades of disastrous neoliberal policies and shines a light on neoliberalism's failure and inability to combat the underlying health crisis that it caused through its very own framework. It was the conditions of neoliberalism that triggered the crisis; not an inevitable series of external events. It is not a coincidence that the countries that are suffering the most from the impact of the virus are the countries whose governments are most closely aligned with the neoliberal project – the same countries that have ignored the recommendations of the WHO. The most dramatic case of this has been in Brazil, where the government, led by President Jair Bolsonaro, has underestimated the pandemic and created a

permanent campaign in favour of maintaining unrestricted economic activity.

On the other hand, the state of public health is in less dire straits where progressive governments have respected the recommendations of the WHO. Argentina, for example, is undergoing an extended quarantine and bolstering its public health system, including developing tests through its national public science system. Cuba, which has a public health system that is well-known for its quality, has adopted policies of selective physical distancing and testing and is implementing a model of community medicine. Venezuela has among the lowest rates of infection and deaths per number of residents – despite the extreme commercial, financial, and media blockade and the permanent threat of the hybrid war led by the United States. In the midst of the pandemic, this hybrid war threatens to compound the impacts of the health crisis with economic difficulties that could be used to justify external intervention.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has accelerated a deep global economic recession. In April, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) anticipated a 5.4 per cent decrease in the GDP in 2020; by June, an [estimate](#) from the International Monetary Fund predicted that it would fall by 9.4 per cent. The economic crash particularly impacts countries, regions, and sectors that rely on the export of oil, gas, and minerals (where the fall in international prices of natural resources has been felt the most acutely); tourism and remittances from migrants; the flow of global finance (the Brazilian economy has been among the most deeply impacted by capital outflows); and participation in global

commerce and global production chains. In addition to the recession and capital outflows, the people have been adversely affected by the devaluation of their currencies, and, in some countries, by bloated external debt.

This ominous economic reality has disastrous consequences for the majority of the population. International organisations warn of a substantial increase in unemployment; according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in 2020, unemployment will increase by at least 3.4 per cent – on top of the 8.1 per cent unemployment rate recorded in 2019 – placing the unemployment rate at 11.5 per cent in the region. This means that roughly 37.7 million people or more will be unemployed. Poverty levels are also expected to increase by an average of 4.4 per cent according to ECLAC, impacting 34.7 per cent of the population. This increase in poverty will mean a step backwards towards the reality that prevailed in the early part of the twenty-first century before the wave of progressive governments. Along the same lines, the United Nation’s World Food Programme has warned that roughly 14 million people across Latin America and the Caribbean may suffer from hunger and food insecurity this year. This current economic landscape, managed within a neoliberal policy framework, informs whether or not – and how many – resources are allocated to confront the pandemic. More often than not, protecting ‘the economy’ comes before protecting the people.

Throughout 2019, the almost non-existent economic growth at the regional level, combined with neoliberal reforms, has opened Latin America to conflicts and to the collapse of the credibility of its governments. While the public health emergency reinforced presidential authority in many cases, as time progressed, the gravity of the current crisis and the profound impact of decades of neoliberal policies have made neoliberalism's growing crisis of legitimacy crystal clear.



Shoppers at the market pay to be disinfected. Rodríguez Market, La Paz, Bolivia, 2020. Carlos Fiengo

Neoliberalism's Use of the Pandemic, Part I: Authoritarian Reinforcement

The IMF has referred to the global economic crisis unleashed by the pandemic as the 'Great Lockdown', drawing an analogy to the Great Depression that began in 1929. This reference not only highlights the similarities between the magnitude of both situations and their impact, but also attributes the crisis to the restrictive public health measures, particularly the implementation of physical distancing policies commonly referred to as 'quarantine'. There is nothing new in the history of capitalism – from its very beginning to today – about economic powers opposing quarantine. The expansion of plagues has long been closely [linked](#) with commercial circuits, its transportation networks, and processes of capitalist globalisation.

In contrast, the strategies of isolation and physical distancing recommended by the WHO, as well as by the general dynamic of the crisis that the pandemic has provoked, have granted a new role to the state in the areas of health, social, and economic policies. Serious questions are being asked about the new role of the state under conditions of deep inequalities produced by neoliberal policies. However, the new role of the state does not necessarily imply a contradiction with the neoliberal order; during the financial crisis of 2008, for example, the state intervened to bail out banks and corporations.

The logic of quarantine and state intervention justified by the crisis has been used – especially by neoliberal governments in the region

– to reinforce a politics that is increasingly repressive and authoritarian. This shift was already underway in many of the countries under siege by the neoliberal offensive – especially in the face of the increasing scrutiny that this model and its advocates have faced from the public, which has intensified over the last year.

This has also occurred in most countries throughout Central America. There, the sparse presence of social and health policies stands in contrast to the imposition of curfews and a state of emergency, the reinforcement of militarisation, and increasing punishment of those who disobey isolation measures, which in many cases has led to new violations of human rights, especially in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Along the same lines, the assassination of leaders of social movements and former guerrilleros in Colombia has increased since the emergence of the pandemic. In Peru, the [Police Protection Act](#) (bill N° 31012), approved in 2019, has been put into effect, granting impunity to security forces for repressive actions and brutality. In Chile, the pandemic has pushed back the referendum to reform the country's constitution, giving a breath of air – at least for now – to a government that has been under scrutiny by sustained protests. Now the government is raising the possibility of going back on the call for the referendum, instead strengthening the security apparatus with the purchase of new equipment, putting the military back on the streets, instituting a curfew, and continuing to use repression to disperse the protests that are resurging in this new context.

Surely, the most dramatic example of this deepening of authoritarian logic is the situation in Bolivia, where a coup in November 2019

removed the government of the legitimate president, Evo Morales, refused to recognise the electoral results, and imposed a self-proclaimed 'transitional' government led by Jeanine Áñez, a conservative senator from the Department of the Beni. The de facto government led by Áñez – marked initially by massacres in Sacaba and Senkata and by the return of neoliberal policies – has postponed the elections that had been set for 3 May in the context of the pandemic; it has used the logic of the quarantine to persecute its critics, attack the primarily indigenous majority, and deepen its policies of dispossession and corruption.

Among other measures, in May Áñez enacted Supreme Decree 4231, which makes it criminally **punishable** to publish written, printed, or artistic information that generates 'uncertainty among the population'. This is a serious violation of the freedom of expression and the right to information. In addition, the government has responded with repression to protests that are demanding food, healthcare services, work, and the execution of the postponed elections.

Yet another example of the continuous threats to the last glimmers of democracy took place in May, when a group of military personnel led by Carlos Orellana, the Commander in Chief of the Bolivian Armed Forces, barged into the Plurinational Legislative Assembly with an ultimatum **demanding** the ratification – with no changes – of the Armed Forces' proposal for promotions. The proposal had been sent by self-proclaimed president Áñez in February. This is a new level of authoritarianism for a government that is increasingly dabbling in corruption scandals. Now the government has attempted to postpone the elections once again, now proposed to

take place in September – perhaps because Luis Arce, the candidate of the Movement for Socialism (Evo Morales’s party) – is leading in the pre-election polls.

There is an increase in the power of the military in much of the region. In Bolivia, the military has gained power since the coup. In Brazil, the military has a substantial presence in Bolsonaro’s government. In countries throughout the region, the military forces have been empowered to control security mechanisms and public spaces and have used the pretext of quarantine to exercise control over the population. The application of authoritarianism and neoliberal policies have become increasingly militaristic, using a range of tactics such as lawfare (or judicial warfare) and the restriction of democratic life. In other words, a neofascist beltway is emerging in the region.



Social distancing and order during the delivery of food baskets, El Salvador, 29 April 2020.

Casa Presidencial / Fotos Públicas

Neoliberalism's Use of the Pandemic, Part II: Policies of Structural Adjustment

In mid-April, a group of right-wing politicians from Spain and Latin America – alongside the writer Mario Vargas Llosa, who has turned into a spokesperson for neoliberalism in recent years – released a [declaration](#) titled ‘The Pandemic Should Not Be a Pretext for Authoritarianism’. In this declaration, they react to the emergence of state interventionism, socialism, and populism by accusing ‘many governments’ of taking ‘measures that indefinitely restrict basic freedoms and rights’. For them, following the tradition of Hayek and Friedman, liberty is considered only in an individualistic sense, linked to the protection of economic freedom. They characterise any policy that restricts the free market as being authoritarian, even if this policy is instituted by democratic institutions and governments, and/or by the masses. This same philosophy has been used to support and justify the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1973-1990). Along the same lines, Brazil’s minister of foreign affairs, Ernesto Araújo, criticised the policies of the WHO and denounced what he calls the ‘communavirus’.

Alongside these discourses and policies, many of the region’s neoliberal governments have taken advantage of the pandemic to advance neoliberal socioeconomic reforms – many of which were already part of the programme underway before the emergence of the virus – or to promote aid packages that benefit the economic powers. For example, in Paraguay, the government of Mario Abdo [announced](#) a

‘structural reform of the state’ whose objective is to shrink the state apparatus, reduce public spending, privatise public sector enterprises, and decrease salaries and pensions. In Colombia, the government of Iván Duque approved Decree 444, which takes away economic resources from local governments in the country in order to subsidise banks and companies. Duque also managed to approve the Law of Economic Emergency, which gives the government superpowers to advance neoliberal labour reform and pension reform. However, he has not yet been able to implement either. Along the same lines, the dictatorship in Bolivia continues to dismantle the gains won by the government of Evo Morales and has deregulated the economy, incurred a new cycle of external debt, and approved transgenic agricultural reform.

Yet another tragic example of a neoliberal structural adjustment policy that has been implemented in the era of the pandemic is the case of Ecuador under President Lenín Moreno. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Moreno’s administration has continued the policies of structural adjustment that were imposed as part of its [agreement](#) with the IMF (approved in early 2019) despite the massive discontent and protests that it has faced. Between March and April 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, Moreno’s administration made significant debt payments in order to receive new IMF loans. To be able to access these new loans, Moreno’s administration is required to adhere to even harsher neoliberal policies. Finally, in May 2020, Moreno’s government obtained parliamentary approval for two bills: the Organic Law for Humanitarian Support to Combat the Crisis Derived from COVID-19 and the Organic Law for the Ordering of Public Finances. These bills advance the state’s structural adjustment

policies, close or privatise public businesses and offices, facilitate the payment of lower salaries, and worsen the precarious conditions under which the working class lives and works. The structural adjustment package imposed by the IMF, and that Moreno's administration agreed to, also includes substantial cuts to university budgets, which provoked student protests; the budget cuts to universities have been temporarily suspended by the supreme court as a result. This austerity package has been criticized by large sections of the population and by the political opposition, creating a situation that could trigger a new crisis.



The Landless Workers' Movement's (MST) main acts of solidarity are geared towards the distribution of food through various formats: food baskets, farmers' markets, and lunch boxes. Paraná, Brazil, April 2020.

MST

Instability and Political Crisis in Brazil

Brazil has become the regional epicentre of COVID-19 and one of the centres of the pandemic on a global level. The failure of the federal government to adopt sufficient measures to combat the pandemic has created a catastrophic situation that is edging towards a humanitarian tragedy. This inaction by the federal government is accompanied by President Jair Bolsonaro's approach of underestimating, or even denying the problem, and placing concern for the economy before concern for the people. The gross underreporting of cases, mainly due to the scarcity of tests being carried out, does not allow us to have a true grasp of the health crisis underway. The Imperial College of London estimates that the **total number** of active cases of COVID-19 as of the end of June is at least three times higher than the official count (1.23 million active cases), bringing the estimate of active cases in the country to at least 3.7 million.

This health crisis is the greatest expression – and one of the causes – of the political and social instability that faces Bolsonaro's government. This government has increased its political isolation, amplifying a tendency that was already in place. Bolsonaro has picked fights with legislative and judicial powers and has intensified conflicts with governors and mayors, breaking with his past allies and pressuring them to open up the economy (as is the case with the governors of the states of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, for example). On top of this, Minister of Health Luiz Henrique Mandetta resigned – as did his replacement – due to differences over the health policy pushed

forward by Bolsonaro. Minister of Justice Sérgio Moro resigned and denounced the president while attempting to manipulate the federal police to guarantee impunity for his relatives from a variety of investigations that are underway. All of this has further isolated Bolsonaro's government. As a judge, Moro was a main force in pushing forward the court case known as Lava Jato, which led to former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's imprisonment and his exclusion from the 2018 elections. Moro's resignation in particular both exemplified and accelerated the declining support for Bolsonaro's government by an important section of the population – particularly the middle class – that had supported him from the beginning.

While Bolsonaro still has the support of a resistant core that rallies for him in the streets, carrying out caravans, actions, and encampments, the president has sought higher approval among low-income sectors. This effort has been based on two main discourses: the defence of the use of Chloroquine to treat COVID-19 and a supposed concern about employment. In the first case – contrary to scientific evidence – Bolsonaro seeks to instil the idea that there is a quick solution to the disease. In the second case, he uses a discourse that economic activities should return to 'normal', which could garner support from those who are in desperate situations and have seen their incomes diminish or disappear. In addition, Bolsonaro has tried to take credit for the economic aid created and approved by the National Congress (despite having initially opposed it and then attempted to decrease the amount of the aid package).

Bolsonaro has increasingly attempted to gain more support from the armed forces, whose members have increasingly been appointed

to government positions. The most extreme example of this is their complete control over the Ministry of Health following the resignation of two former ministers of health in the middle of the pandemic. The position of interim head of the ministry and 40 other strategic positions are occupied by military personnel who lack training in the arena of health. More than 2,800 members of the armed forces have been appointed to administrative state roles under Bolsonaro's administration.

Faced with efforts to remove Bolsonaro from the presidency, his administration has established alliances with legislators from parties that do not have any ideological commitment and who instead sell their votes to whoever is willing to pay more. This is what is called *centrão*. Leading the charge in these negotiations are military leaders who are generally critical of this kind of alliance but who are now seeking it out in exchange for positions in the civil government (some have been appointed to high-level positions in Bolsonaro's cabinet).

It is important to note that the weakening of the government does not necessarily mean that Bolsonaro will be ousted, though it does allow society to see the correlation of political forces more clearly. A political dispute is currently being played out within the establishment between neofascists – symbolized by the current president – and the traditional right wing, which is represented by other institutions (such as the parliament and legal system) and some state governors. In this context, Bolsonaro's challenge is to avoid

impeachment and to organise a parliamentary alliance that guarantees him support from the heads of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

The effort to defeat Bolsonaro has taken on an unprecedented central role and has created awareness among wide-ranging sectors of society: the Left, institutions (such as the parliament, legal system, and especially the federal supreme court), intellectuals, public figures, civil society organisations, and political parties – even those that represent the right wing. However, such advances bring up debates and challenges within the Left, such as the difficulty of creating a tactical alliance in defence of Bolsonaro’s impeachment among the most diverse sectors of society. This is indicative of the difficulty of bringing forward a left front that is capable of building a people’s project in Brazil and engaging in a dialogue with society about an adequate and uniting exit from the crisis.

Political organisations and people’s movements in Brazil have raised two important initiatives along these lines. The first is the construction of a [Popular Emergency Plan](#) in defence of life, health, income, and employment. This platform, in addition to denouncing the neoliberal and neofascist project that is underway, is based on the understanding that it is impossible to dissociate the social mobilisation that is confronting the pandemic from a qualitative and programmatic government plan. However, the current government – which is guided by private business interests and acts against scientific evidence – limits the possibility of state action in the fight against the crisis and makes it extremely difficult to overcome the challenges that the country is faced with.

The second initiative of political organisations and people's movements in Brazil is the construction of a Politics of Solidarity in Brazil's major peripheries, which helps coordinate a platform of people's movements that encompasses their diverse initiatives. Based on solidarity, the battle of ideas, and grassroots work, this process aims to strengthen the organisation of the masses through a coordinated, popular project and to strengthen the people's struggle as a whole. Solidarity in this context goes hand in hand with the struggle for rights: the right to quarantine with physical distancing, guaranteed income, and access to water, food, and health.

A fierce struggle is necessary to win these rights and to gain access to public resources – and it is people's organisations that channel this resistance and seek to embody hope for the people. Fighting for people's rights in the context of the pandemic requires putting in the work to support building this process at all levels – from the local level to the national level – in a coordinated way. Either the working class will organise, fight for its life, and prepare for a political struggle, or it will witness the bourgeoisie pillage the country and bury the corpses of thousands of predominantly working-class and poor people.



Chess in the time of COVID. Venezuela 2020.
Dikó / CacriPhotos

Images of Imperialist Intervention

This alarming public health crisis has not stopped the US from continuing its aggressive imperialist policies in the region. For many years, Cuba and Venezuela have been the main targets of the US-led hybrid war, with the goal of strengthening US domination over what it considers to be its ‘backyard’ (for more on the hybrid war, read our dossier no. 17, *Venezuela and Hybrid Wars in Latin America*). Today, we are in a key a moment of intense global dispute between the US and other powers, such as China and Russia (Boron 2020).

In Cuba, the policy of Washington’s war hawks – sharpened by US President Donald Trump – has been to tighten the sanctions, accompanied by a succession of hostile actions in the diplomatic, political, and economic arenas. Among these actions, it is worth highlighting the US Department of State’s re-inclusion of Cuba in the list of countries that is ‘not cooperating fully with U.S. counterterrorism efforts in 2019’, making 2020 ‘the first year that Cuba has been certified as not fully cooperating since 2015’. This selected group of public enemies, accused of ‘not fully cooperating with U.S. counterterrorism efforts’, is made up of Iran, Syria, North Korea, Venezuela, and now Cuba since May 2020.

In a mix of clumsiness and desperation in the midst of the crisis, the United States government opted to attack Cuba’s cooperation with countries around the world to collaborate on public health measures and combat the crisis. The US State Department openly deployed a

pressure campaign against the rest of the world so that other countries would not ask for help from Cuba. Despite the fact that the core of the US narrative was amplified by private mainstream media, their attempt failed: the role of the solidarity brigades became well-known, and images of white coats and Cuban flags arriving at airports in countries in crisis spread throughout the world.

Even before the pandemic, members of Cuba's Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade were sent to twenty-four countries, including Haiti. The first country in the Americas to expel European colonialism in 1804, in recent years Haiti's dependence on imperialist powers has increased, forced by coups d'état, foreign military occupation, and humanitarian intervention by non-profit organisations in the Global North. As a result, Haiti – one of the most violent experiments of the neoliberal war – has become the counterpoint of Cuba, robbed of its sovereignty, existing in a state of general poverty, and faced with a lack of public services and growing repression. In Haiti, as in other countries, Cuba's response of solidarity stands out in contrast with the aggressive policies of the United States, which prefers instead to deploy troops and further cement its warlike character.

In the case of Venezuela, the confrontation by the United States has continued to escalate. With each new confrontation, the United States' plot of siege is increasingly exposed. The foiled mercenary incursion in May, 'Operation Gideon', is another watershed moment in a long sequence of attacks that are ignored or justified by international mainstream media. The operation is representative of the character of the Venezuelan opposition: completely surrendered to

imperialism. One aspect that stands out is that the operation was established through a contract that formally linked Washington's puppet Juan Guaidó to Jordan Goudreau, the head of the mercenary corporation Silvercorp and a former member of the US Armed Forces who recently worked in a security operation for a campaign event for US President Donald Trump. The operation is illustrative of the outsourcing (real or simulated) of military interventions, which the US has promoted since the Gulf War (for more on this, read our CoronaShock study no. 2: '[*CoronaShock and the Hybrid War Against Venezuela*](#)').

The Colombian state, currently in the hands of Iván Duque (former president Álvaro Uribe's disciple and staunch *uribista*), has a special role in the siege against the Venezuelan government. In public settings, Colombia is one of the main forces in the Lima Group, the diplomatic forum that brings together right-wing governments across the continent, supposedly to promote the well-being of the Venezuelan people. At a more clandestine level, Colombia allows for the establishment of paramilitary training camps stationed to attack Venezuela.

While this is happening, Colombia is struggling with a spiral of political violence that has placed the leaders of social movements in its crosshairs. The police-military machinery unceasingly produces scandals, including spying on public figures – some in its own government.

The United States has nine military bases in Colombia, as well as others in the Caribbean, some of which belong to the North

Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). One aspect of the intervention driven by Southern Command is true army propaganda. For example, much-touted naval bases were put in place – supposedly to intercept boats carrying illegal drugs – after the US attorney general accused Nicolás Maduro and other *chavista* leaders of narco-trafficking and put a bounty on their heads.

The fleet that Southern Command deployed in the Caribbean appeared in the news when the United States let it be known that it could be used to stop the Iranian oil tankers that were on their way to Venezuela. Despite this, the oil tankers arrived in Venezuela, breaking the US embargo. The image of Iranian tankers in the Caribbean, escorted by the National Bolivarian Armed Forces' Sukhoi planes, is symbolic of the shattering of US power. It shed light on the absurdity of the threats of Trump's administration, which has accumulated quite a number of failures in recent months. However, the military threat remains and should not be downplayed.

It is noteworthy that the US government is promoting conflict at a time when the country's death count continues to skyrocket (having reached over 120,000 as of late June, the highest in the world). This reality has unleashed such chaos that even the US' well-oiled propaganda machine has not succeeded in hiding the effects of the pandemic, nor the blunders of the Trump administration. This stands in sharp contrast to the political action of other states, such as China and its rapid and comprehensive response to the pandemic, and Cuba. Just ninety miles south of the US, this small rebellious island has been able to combat the pandemic despite the US embargo while simultaneously aiding other people across the world with its medical

solidarity brigades. Meanwhile, the US' unilateralism has reached a record level, also demonstrated by its fight with the WHO. It seems that the pandemic is accelerating the global hegemonic transition (Merino 2020).

On top of this, the streets in the US are on fire once more, a result of deeply embedded structural racism and police violence. The people's response to the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others is another indication of the level of tension that surges through the United States; these uprisings chip away at the image of an all-powerful empire that the country once brandished.



Community kitchens combat hunger in poor areas. Villa Celina, Buenos Aires Province, Argentina, 2020.

Nazareno Roviello / Union of Workers of the Popular Economy (UTEPE)

People's Movements and the Challenges Ahead

In October 2019, a new wave of struggles spread throughout much of Latin America in response to the neoliberal offensive. Within just a few months, the challenges and confines presented by the pandemic would force the actions and demands of people's movements in the region to take on a different shape, each in their own way. But this change in the conditions of struggle has not meant their disappearance. New forms of organising have arisen through social media, with Twitter storms and virtual meetings; *cacerolazos* (the banging of pots and pans in protest, often from balconies and windows in the era of COVID-19); street demonstrations adhering to social distancing with protestors wearing masks; and, more recently, the return of strikes and the blockading of streets and highways. This new face of people's protests has become more and more present in the context of the worsening health, social, and political conditions facing the poor and the working class.

The effects of the pandemic and its use to further the capitalist agenda have manifested through a significant increase in layoffs; reductions in salaries; the increasing precariousness of work, especially in the private and informal sectors; and a notable advance in the digitalisation of work (such as the increasingly precarious 'uberisation') that capitalists had already begun to promote before the emergence of the virus. Faced with this daunting reality, workers in the region have responded with various actions, including delivery

workers' and other essential workers' strikes on both a regional and global level. It is worth paying particular attention to the conflict and demands of health workers throughout the region (for more on this read our dossier no. 29, *Health Is a Political Choice*).

The situation is even worse in sectors with precarious or occasional work that is insufficient for sustaining life. The absence of social policies has had a disastrous impact, aggravating and triggering plagues of hunger and illness (to read more about this on a global level, read our twentieth newsletter (2020), *Hunger Gnaws at the Edges of the World*). In this context, people's movements have carried out heroic work, often in very difficult situations, organising canteens for the people; providing food and basic goods that are necessary for public health; contributing to collective organisation; and demanding effective solutions from governments. Among these efforts, it is worth mentioning the distribution of food by organisations in poor neighbourhoods in Chapare (Bolivia) that have been persecuted by the dictatorship. In Brazil, more than more than 1,200 tonnes of food were delivered to shantytowns in cities throughout the country by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and other people's movements. In Argentina, organisations linked to the popular economy have led such efforts, demanding food and measures that guarantee assistance to poor neighbourhoods that are suffering from the rapidly spreading virus.

In Guatemala, El Salvador, and Ecuador, women hang white flags along the highway and families hang white flags from their homes to symbolise widespread hunger and the demand for food. In Panama, the poor are protesting by blockading the streets and

organising *cacerolazos*. In Santiago, Chile, residents of poor neighbourhoods who have protested and constructed barricades are being repressed by the same government that only offers them scraps. In El Alto, La Paz, and elsewhere in Bolivia, workers and neighbours protest, denouncing the lack of work and food. Similar events have unfolded in Bogotá (Colombia) and other large urban centres in the region. The rejection of the neoliberal agenda in Ecuador; *cacerolazos* and exploding fireworks in the streets of Bolivia demanding elections; and *panelaços* (*cacerolazos*) in Brazil alongside the chants *Fora Bolsonaro!* ('Get out, Bolsonaro!') seem to indicate the reinvigoration of people's struggles under the new conditions raised by the pandemic.

The spread of the virus in poor neighbourhoods threatens to provoke a social and health catastrophe. This reality is not limited to urban areas and has been denounced by movements across the region, from the Amazonian departments in Colombia (among the poorest regions in the country) to Haiti. Organisations of indigenous peoples have also denounced the dire situation looming over their homelands; as of late May, there are at least [20,000](#) cases of infection in the Amazon basin according to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

The pandemic has also exposed and aggravated the traumas of injustice and the double exploitation, oppression, and violence against women and against people across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Poor women in particular have been impacted by the loss of income, the responsibility of domestic caretaking, and the increase in violence, as seen by the growing numbers of femicides. In Chile, the

Coordinadora Feminista 8M has played an important role, taking a lead in organising collective feminist caretaking for families and populations in these areas; shedding light on and demanding urgent attention towards the need for the eradication of intrafamilial violence and the protection of women, children, and adolescents; and demanding the right not to leave home to work during the pandemic and the right to guaranteed income and other emergency health measures.

Feminist women's movements and other movements with a feminist analysis have voiced loudly and clearly that caring for human life is worth more than profits. The International People's Assembly has **called** upon the people of the world to put the preservation of life before the interests of capital and for an emancipatory exit to the contradiction between health and the economy that continually emerges within the capitalist framework. The ALBA movements' platform in Latin America has called for the condemnation of neoliberal governments, for the lifting of sanctions, and for the rejection of imperialist aggressions. The group also called to give life to a political programme and project from below. Not only has the global reach of the virus-turned-pandemic aggravated the social suffering caused by neoliberalism; it has also made very clear the effects of capitalist globalisation and raised a debate about the global disorder. The resistance of the people brings up the necessity of building alternatives, which must strengthen and renew internationalism.



The MST organises the donation of fifty tons of food in the interior of Paraná, Brazil, April 2020.

Wellington Lenon / MST

The Past and the Present

The expansion of the pandemic in Latin America has revealed the precariousness of the system of public health and the eroded conditions of life for the poor, the result of decades of neoliberal policies – as shown by the failure of these policies to respond to the spread of the disease. In the face of the crisis that is unfolding, the hegemonic narrative often raises the urgency to return to the ‘normalcy’ of the past. However, as we have shown, the past has in essence normalised the economic, social, migration, environmental, and climate crisis that characterises the development of neoliberalism. The future cannot simply be reduced to going back to the past. The building of an effective exit to the crisis must be centred on a profound transformation of its true causes.



Suggested Reading

BORON, ATILIO. 'Notas sobre el imperialismo y la estrategia de seguridad de los Estados Unidos' ['Notes on the current affairs of imperialism and on US new national security strategy']. *Las venas del Sur siguen abiertas. Debates sobre el imperialismo de nuestro tiempo* [*The Veins of the South Are Still Open: Debates around the imperialism of our time*], edited by López, Emiliano, LeftWord, 2020.

KATZ, CLAUDIO. 'Confluencia del virus en América Latina' ['The Confluence of the Virus in Latin America']. *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, 14 May 2020. <https://www.thetricontinental.org/es/ba-research/katz-confluencia/>

MERINO, GABRIEL. 'La reconfiguración imperial de Estados Unidos y las fisuras internas frente al ascenso de China' ['The Imperial Reconfiguration of the United States Against the Rise of China']. *Las venas del Sur siguen abiertas. Debates sobre el imperialismo de nuestro tiempo*. [*The Veins of the South Are Still Open: Debates around the imperialism of our time*], edited by López, Emiliano, LeftWord, 2020./

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Mangoes, plantains, and avocados. Caracas, Venezuela, 2020.
Dikó / CacriPhotos





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